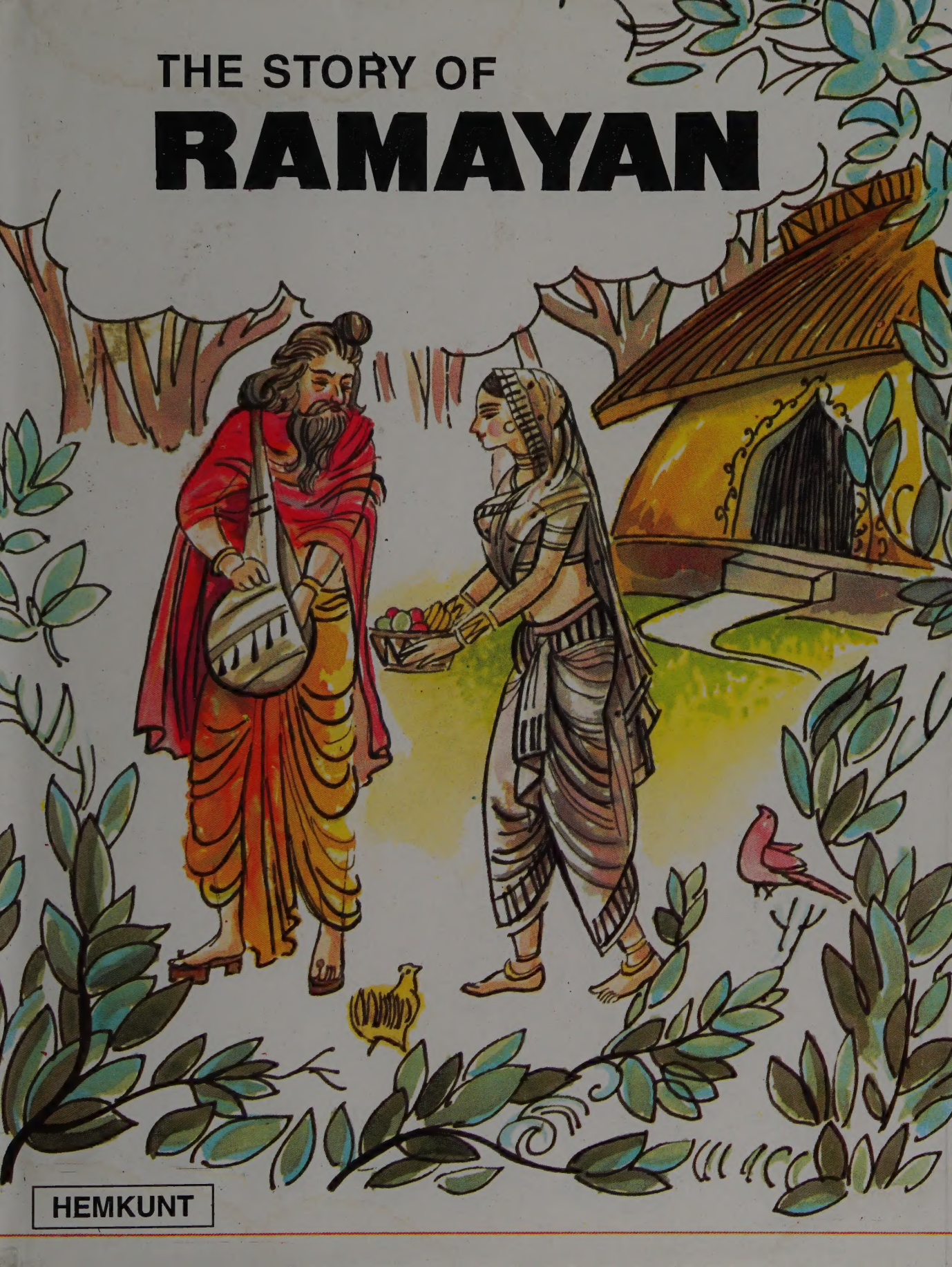
THE STORY OF
RAMAYAN



HEMKUNT

The story of RAMAYAN

THE EPIC TALE OF INDIA

Retold by
Bani Roy Choudhry

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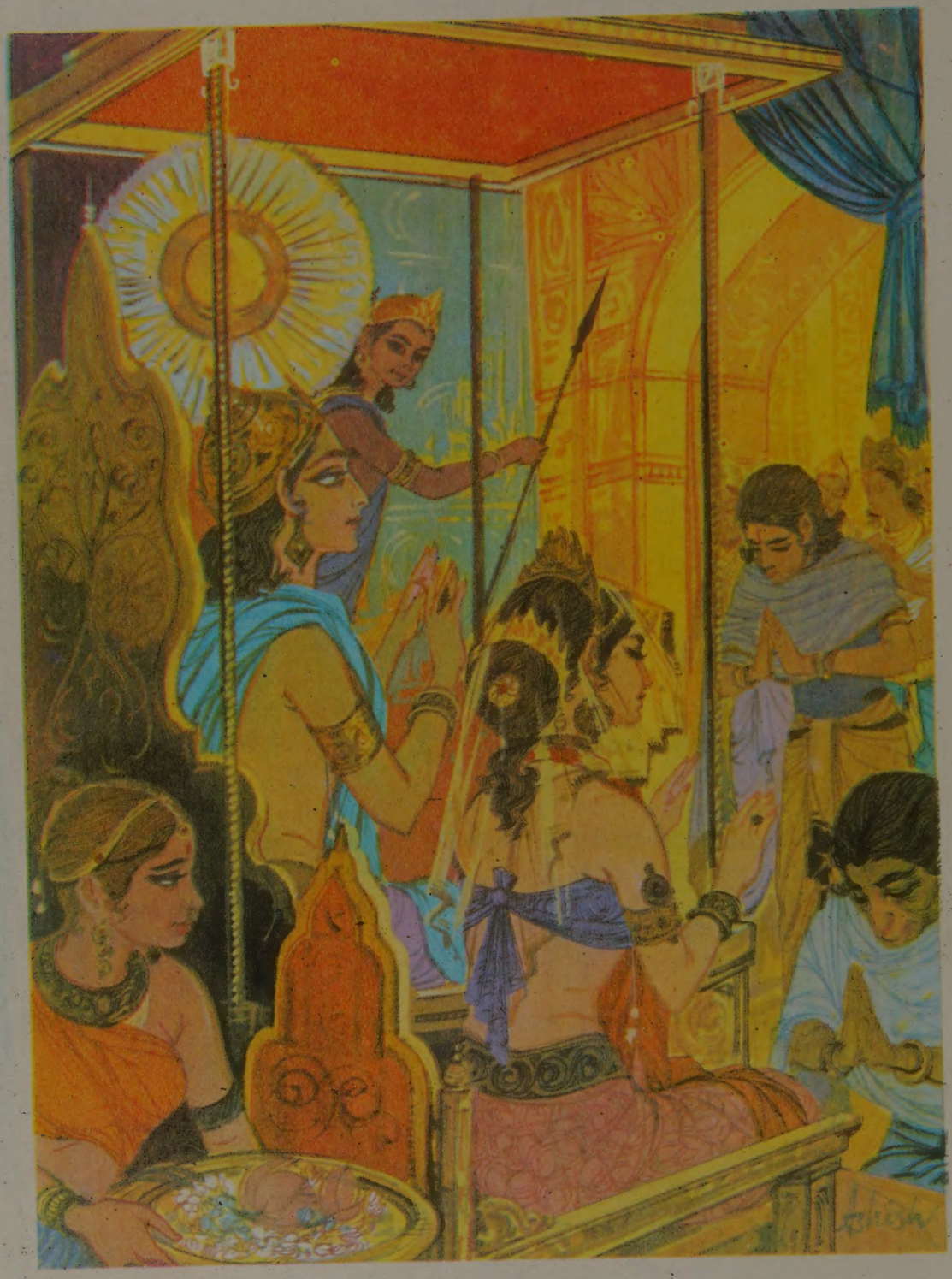


Rama is installed as king. (page 48)

Kaikeyi Demands the Exile of Rama

Rama was the son of Dasrath, the king of Ayodhya, and Queen Kaushalya. He had three brothers - Bharat, son of Queen Kaikeyi, Lakshman and Shatrughan, sons of Queen Sumitra.

When he was of age, his father decided to instal him as the Yuvraj or heir to the throne. Dasrath summoned his ministers and commanded them to make arrangements for the ceremony.

The people welcomed the news and rejoiced. Rama, dear to everybody's heart, was to be made the Yuvraj. Swift preparations were made for the ceremony and the city was bedecked with flowers and buntings. The streets were strewn with flowers and coloured lamps hung in every house.

The news of Rama's installation had not yet reached queen Kaikeyi. She had a hunch-backed maid named Manthara. When she heard the news of Rama's installation she rushed to Kaikeyi. "Rani," she said, "have you heard that Rama is to be made the Yuvraj tomorrow?"

Kaikeyi was happy at the news. She loved Rama dearly. Moreover, Rama was not only the eldest prince but was also wise and just. She felt that he alone of the four princes was fit to be the king of the mighty empire. So rising from the couch she took off her golden necklace and presented it to Manthara.

"You have indeed brought me a good news," she said.

"Rama is as dear to me as Bharat. Nothing could be better than to see him installed as the Yuvraj."

Manthara flung the necklace to the ground. "You are indeed a fool," she burst out. "Bharat has as much a right to the throne as Rama."

"When Rama becomes king, do you think he will still love you and look after you? I am sure he will banish Bharat and perhaps get him killed to make himself safe."

Kaikeyi was shocked at these words. She protested, "How can you speak thus about my Rama? He is so good and just."

"Your love for Rama has made you blind," retorted the maid. "He will not remain so good and just when he becomes king."

"Surely you loved Bharat more than Rama? If you wish your

son to live and be king then now is the time to act. Get Rama banished to the forest. Do you remember the two boons which the king had once granted to you? You did not name them at that time saying that you would ask for them when the need arose. Now is the time to ask the king to fulfil his promise and grant you the two boons, namely the exile of Rama to the forest for fourteen years and the installation of Bharat as the Yuvraj."

Thus led on, Kaikeyi's heart was gradually filled with fear for Bharat's welfare and safety. Evil thoughts crowded out all the noble sentiments in her. Forgotten was her love for Rama. She took off her costly jewellery, untied her hair and flung herself on the floor.

When the king came to impart the good news to his favourite queen, he was amazed to find Kaikeyi in that strange condition. "What ails you, my queen, that you lie thus?" he asked her anxiously. "Tell me the cause and I will do my best to remove it. I pledge my word in the name of Rama, who is dearer to me than life itself." Kaikeyi said, "Do you remember that you once granted me two boons which I did not name at that time? Today you must grant them. One is that you banish Rama to the forest for fourteen years and the other that you instal Bharat as the Yuvraj."

Dasrath could not believe his ears. "What harm has Rama done to you that you desire his banishment? He loves you even more than Bharat does. Withdraw your request. Ask for anything else and I will gladly grant it but do not ask me to be separated from my dearest son".

But Kaikeyi was adamant. Dasrath became angry and sad by turns. He threatened her and implored her. He tried to make her change her mind but to no purpose.

The Exile of Rama

Ayodhya was unaware of these happenings. All arrangements had been completed for the installation ceremony. The people of Ayodhya, gay and festive, had assembled at the palace gates. "Why does not the king come?" They asked each other. "What could be the cause of the delay?" Sumantra, the Chief minister, was sent to inform the king that the priests demanded his presence. Sumantra was shocked to see the condition of the king. Kaikeyi said to the minister, "The king wishes to see Rama. Send for him at once."

Rama was in the coronation hall clad in the rich ceremonial robes. On receiving the message from the palace Rama hastened to the presence of his father. He was shocked to see him. He asked Kaikeyi, "Have I, by word or deed, hurt the king that I see him thus."

"The king has pledged his word to me but dares not speak because he fears you," replied the queen.

"Tell me," Said Rama. "My father's word is law to me. I shall do whatever he bids."

Kaikeyi replied, "Your father once granted me two boons and I have named them now. One is that you be banished for fourteen years, and the other is that Bharat be made Yuvraj in your place."

Rama bowed respectfully and said, "Mother, I will honour the word of my father. Please send for Bharat at once and instal him as the crown prince."

Rama touched the feet of his father and stepmother and went to inform his mother of the turn of events. Kaushalya was praying. Seeing his face she asked, "Rama why do you look so sad? Today is a day for rejoicing."

"Mother, I have just been banished to the forest for fourteen years by father. He had once pledged two boons to mother Kaikeyi. She has named them now. One is to instal Bharat as the Yuvraj and the other to exile me for fourteen years."

Kaushalya was shocked. Lakshman said, "I will not allow this to happen. I shall destroy anyone who dares to oppose your accession to the throne." Rama shook his head. "I must fulfil the word I have given to father," he said.

Rama now went to inform Sita , his wife. She heard him in

silence and said, "I will also go with you". Rama tried to explain to her the dangers and hardships of life in the forest. She sobbed bitterly and entreated him to let her go with him. Finally he agreed.

When Lakshman heard this he said, "Dear brother, I will also go with you to guard and serve you."

But Rama would not agree to this. He replied, "I cannot allow you to give up the comforts of a palace for my sake. Moreover, who will look after our mothers if we both are gone?"

But Lakshman was adamant.

They cast away their royal robes and put on the simple clothes of poor hermits. They then went to take leave of their father.

The weeping king held Rama close and cried, "O Rama, do not go away thus. Disregard me and my pledge and seize the throne." But Rama only bowed his head. He could not bear to see the grief of his father.

When Rama, Sita and Lakshman came out of the palace the people of Ayodhya wept as though their own son had been banished. Rama could not bear the sight. He got into the chariot with Sita and Lakshman and bade Sumantra to drive away. Sumantra cracked the whip and the horses raced away like the wind.

The End of Dasrath

Dasrath was in tears.The palace which had once resounded with music and laughter, was now filled with silence. No lamps were lit and Ayodhya presented a dark and sad spectacle. The days and nights that passed were full of agony for the king. His mind knew no peace. When Sumantra returned,he eagerly asked him,"Where are my children? What did they say when you left them?"

With bowed head Sumantra answered, "My lord, Rama sends you his salutations. To Bharat he says, "Treat your father as your God." Sita was in tears when I left and Lakshman was full of anger."

On hearing this the king was once again filled with grief. His heart seemed to burst within him. As time passed, this grief was too great for him to bear and his life slowly ebbed away. Dasrath was dead. Ayodhya was inconsolable. Dasrath who had ruled his people like a loving father was no more. Who would perform the last rites of the dead king? No son of his was present at Ayodhya. No one knew where Rama and Lakshman were, and Bharat and Shatrughan had yet not returned from the kingdom of their grandfather. So the priest ordered the body to be embalmed and messengers were sent to bring back Bharat and Shatrughan. The news of the king's death was not conveyed to them. The messenger just said, "Hasten back to Ayodhya on a matter of great urgency."

As the princes entered the city, they were filled with uneasiness. The gay and fair Ayodhya was dismal and deserted. What

could have happened to it? On reaching the palace, Bharat hastened to his mother's presence. She rose to embrace him and related to him all that had taken place. When Bharat heard of his father's death he wept

bitterly. But when he heard of Rama's banishment, he was beside himself with rage. He pushed his mother away. "What wrong had Rama done to you that you exiled him?" He asked. "By this mean act you have killed our father. How could you even think that I would accept the throne, which belongs to my elder brother? I will bring him back".

After performing the last rites of his father, Bharat left in search of Rama.

Bharat found Rama in Chitrakoot. He was living in a hut with Sita. The brothers were overjoyed at meeting each other. Seeing Bharat

in a mourning dress, Rama asked anxiously, "How is our dear father?"

"He is no more," said Bharat. "He could not bear your separation and died of grief."

Rama was stunned. He bent his head in sorrow and wept silently. After a while Bharat said, "Come back dear brother and rule Ayodhya".

Rama replied "I cannot. I have given my word to father to remain in the forest for fourteen years. I will return to Ayodhya only after this period.

"In that case, give me your sandals. I will place them on the throne and will serve Ayodhya in your name in your absence."

Bharat took the sandals from Rama's feet and returned to Ayodhya.

Back in Ayodhya, Bharat placed the sandals on the throne. He himself sat at the foot of the throne and guided the affairs of the State in Rama's name. But Ayodhya was too full of painful memories for him, so he shifted his capital to Nandigram, a small village some distance from Ayodhya. Here he lived as Rama lived in the forest, eating fruits and roots and sleeping on the hard ground.

For the next ten years Rama, Lakshman and Sita wandered through the forests, till they came to Panchavati.

It was a beautiful place on the banks of the Godavari river. They liked this place very much so they decided to live there for a while. Lakshman gathered the branches of trees and logs of wood and built a beautiful little hut. Here the three lived in peace. They ate the juicy fruits of the trees and drank the clear, cool water of the river.

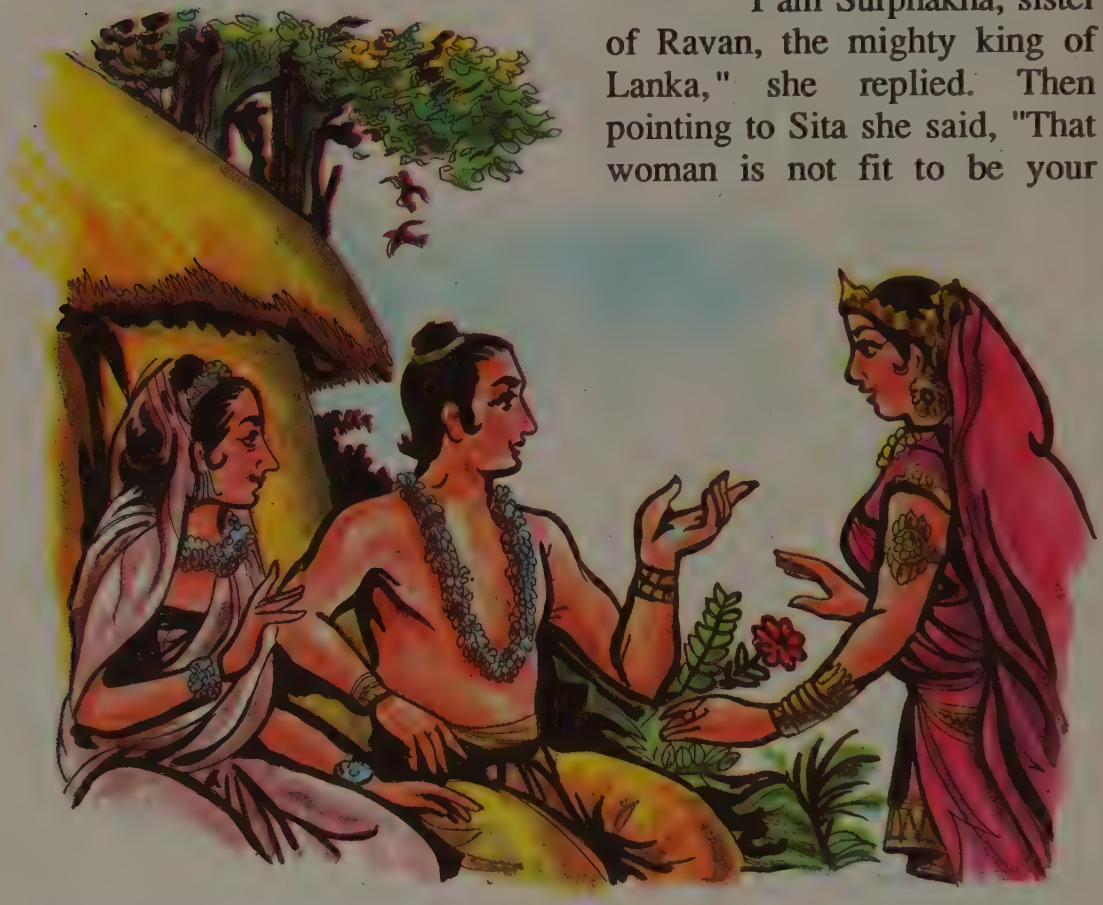
Near their hut lived Jatayu, an ancient bird and a friend of their father. He welcomed them to Panchavati and often spent much of his time

with them. When Rama and Lakshman went out hunting he sat guarding Sita.

Not far from the hut of princes, lived a demoness, Surpnakha. She was the sister of Ravan, the ten headed demon-king of Lanka. One day she spotted Rama and wanted to marry him. By the aid of her magic she changed herself into a beautiful maiden. She went up to Rama and asked him in a sweet voice, "Who are you and who are

your companions?"

Rama related his story and asked her, "Who are you, fair maiden? Why do you wander alone in the forests?"



I am Surpnakha, sister of Ravan, the mighty king of Lanka," she replied. Then pointing to Sita she said, "That woman is not fit to be your wife. Marry me and I will get you anything you desire."

Jokingly Rama replied, "Why don't you marry my brother Lakshman?"

She then turned to Lakshman and tried to win him over by sweet words but he said," Rama is more worthy of you. Go to him."

Surpnakha was angry. She now assumed her true form. She was terrible to behold and Sita shrank in fear. Surpnakha sprang upon her. "I will devour you,"she roared in anger,"and then marry Rama." Before she could lay her hands on Sita, Lakshman sliced off her nose and ears. Howling with pain and anger she fled to Lanka to seek Ravan's help. Ravan was shocked to see her disfigured face. "Who has dared to do such a thing to you?" he asked.

"The banished princes of Ayodhya. Surely you will not allow such a grave disgrace to remain unavenged?" Surpnakha asked. "You must destroy these princes. Moreover," she added slyly, "Sita, the wife of Rama, is beautiful. She would make a lovely queen."

Of course, Ravan would punish these princes. But that was not all. When he heard of Sita's beauty, he decided to carry her away. If he did this Rama would be well punished.

Ravan summoned his chariot and flew away at a great speed till he came to the den of Mareech, the magician.

Mareech was a very cunning fellow and could assume the form of any man or bird or beast by the aid of magic. Ravan stopped his chariot outside Mareech's den and going up to him said, "Mareech, my sister has been insulted by the exiled princes of Ayodhya, who live in Panchavati. I wish to avenge this by kidnapping Sita. Change yourself into a golden deer and go before their hut. Lure Rama away from there and I will do the rest."

"Rama will kill me!" exclaimed Mareech.

"In that case," said Ravan, "before you die imitate the voice of Rama and call out to Lakshman for help!" The frightened Mareech dared not disobey. Assuming the form of a golden deer, he appeared before the hut of Rama. Sita was enchanted. She said to Rama, "My lord, I wish to have the skin of that deer. Is it not beautiful?"

'Too beautiful to be true,' said Lakshman. "That is not an

ordinary animal. Have you ever seen a golden deer before? I am sure it is a demon in disguise. Do not attempt to go after it."

But Rama would not listen. He picked up his bow and his quiver of arrows and said, "Sita wants the skin of that deer so I must get it for her. You, Lakshman, must guard her in my absence. On no account must you leave her alone".

As soon as Rama gave chase, the deer ran swiftly through the forest. Little by little it led Rama away from the hut. Rama had gone a long way off when he realised that he could not take the deer alive. So he shot it with his arrow but ere it fell it assumed the form of Mareech. Rama remembered Lakshman's warning and felt uneasy. The demon imitated his voice and wailed, "Lakshman, brother Lakshman, help me." Rama was frightened. He knew now that he had been fooled. But why? For what purpose? Was Sita safe? Hastily, he retraced his steps towards the hut.

In the meantime, when Sita heard Rama's call she cried, "Brother Lakshman, go immediately to my lord's help. I am sure he is in trouble."

"I do not believe Rama is in trouble. It must be some trick of the demons. Moreover, I cannot leave you alone in this forest. Such are the commands of brother Rama."

His words made Sita very angry. She spoke harshly to him and said, "Go or I shall kill myself."

Lakshman felt helpless. He had never disobeyed his brother. What was he to do, for he could not disregard Sita's commands either. Very much against his wishes he decided to go. Taking a stick, he drew a circle around the entrance of the hut, and said, "Do not, on any account, step beyond this charmed circle and no harm will come to you."

Ravan was hiding behind a tree. As soon as Lakshman left Ravan changed himself into an aged monk and approached the hut. Sita welcomed him and offered him fruits. But Ravan shook his head. He knew that he could not kidnap Sita as long as she was inside the charmed circle. He must make her come out of it. So he said, "I am a monk and cannot enter any home. I cannot accept the fruits from inside the hut. If you want me to accept your offerings you will have to come out and give them to me."

What was Sita to do? How could she send a monk away? That would displease Rama. What harm could an old monk do?

Disregarding Lakshman's warning she stepped across the charmed line, fruits in hand.

Ravan sprang on her like a tiger on its prey and seized her. Sita was terrified. She cried and struggled hard but in vain. Ravan carried her to his magic chariot and sped away.

Sita was faint with fear and anger. She cried, "How dare you do this to me, the wife of the great Rama and the daughter of Janak? Rama will surely kill you and destroy your whole family for this."

Jatayu heard Sita's wails and saw Ravan's chariot racing away with her. He immediately flew up and blocked its way with his wings.

With his big beak he pecked and shattered the chariot completely. Ravan came down to the earth with Sita in his arms. There ensued a fierce fight between him and Jatayu. The bird fought with all his might but he was very old. He soon grew weary. With his sharp talons, he ripped the flesh off Ravan's back. Blood blinded both his eyes. Then Jatayu made the greatest mistake of his life. He came too near Ravan. The demon-king slashed out his sword and sliced off the wings of the mighty bird. Sita was in tears. "Dear Jatayu, you have lost your life for my sake," she wept.

"Do not fear," replied the dying bird. "I shall hold on to life till Rama comes this way. I will tell him of your plight."

Ravan had no time to wait. He was afraid that Rama would appear at any moment. So, taking Sita in his mighty arms, he rose by the help of his magic powers and sped away towards Lanka.

Sita by now had lost all hopes of being saved. She started taking off her ornaments one by one and dropped them to the ground in the hope that they would lead Rama to her. On a mountain top she saw

Sugreev and Hanuman. Throwing her jewellery to them she cried, "Tell Rama that the wicked Ravan of Lanka has kidnapped Sita".

Leaving the dying Mareech, Rama was hastening back to the hut when he met Lakshman, "Lakshman, why do I see you here with-

out Sita? It was not my anguished cry that you heard. It was the cry of the demon Mareech. I am sure he did it to trick us. But why? I fear some misfortune has befallen Sita".

The brothers hastened towards the hut but it was empty. They ran wildly in all directions but there was no trace of Sita. They went on and on through the forest till they came upon the dying Jatayu. The bird gasped out the whole story and said,"I have held on to life to tell you this. Now I can die in peace." With these words, he breathed his last.

Rama and Lakshman continued their search. They came to the mountain where Sugreev lived with his followers. Hanuman asked, "Who are you, fair sirs?"

"I am Rama, the exiled prince of Ayodhya," said Rama "and this is Lakshman, my brother. Lead us to your king. He may be able to help me find my wife Sita who has been kidnapped by Ravan."

Sugreev showed them the ornaments that Sita had dropped in the hope that they might help them in finding her.

Tears blinded the eyes of Rama as he took the ornaments of Sita. Holding them in his hands he swore, "I will wage war against Ravan and kill him. I will wipe out his entire race."

Sugreev ordered Hanuman, "Send my army all over the country with the message that I command my monkeys to be here within ten days."

The army of monkeys hastened forth with the message. Within ten days the capital seemed to overflow with monkeys. They came from every corner of the country.

Sugreev summoned the leaders and said "Go to the corners of the earth and search for Sita in all the countries you visit. Return within a month with some news or you shall die."

Hanuman

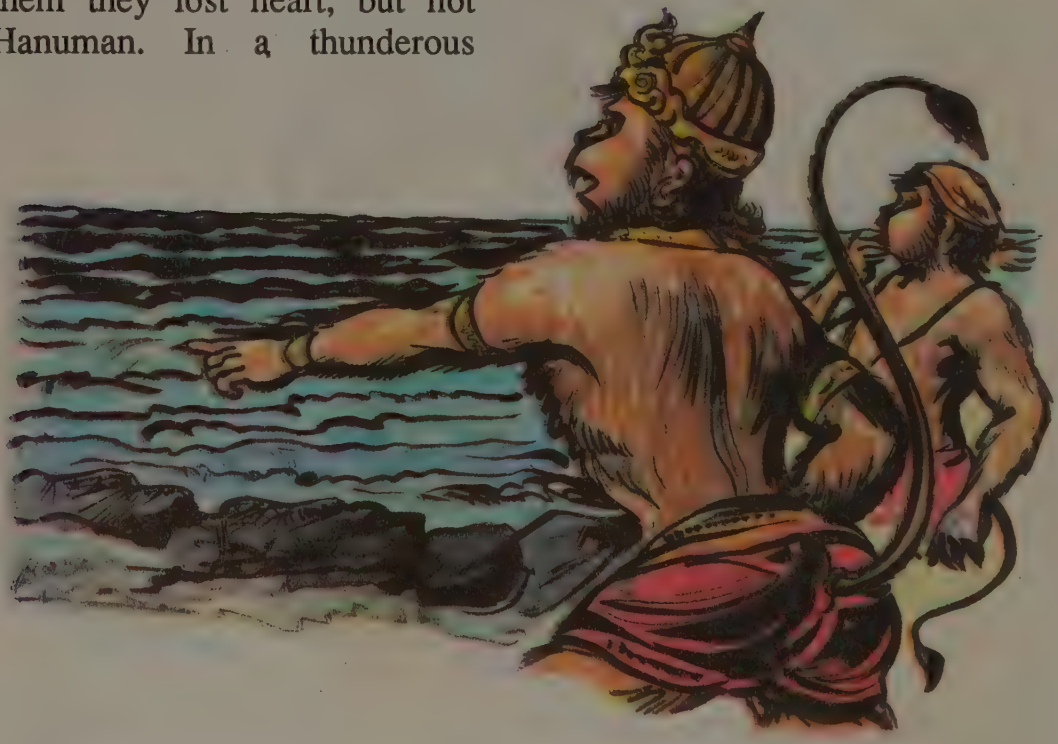
The four divisions of the army went in four directions. Those that had gone to the north, east and west returned after a month without

any news of Sita. The army that went to the South was headed by Hanuman. Hanuman carried Rama's gift- his ring, for Sita. They travelled through various countries and forests but without success. The month was nearing to a close. They were afraid of returning empty-handed. Hanuman said, "In this search for Sita we will lose our lives just as Jatayu has done before us."

"Who speaks of my dear brother Jatayu?" asked a voice. They saw a huge bird sitting on a mountain peak. Hanuman related the story of Rama to the bird and asked, "Do you know the land where Ravan lives?"

"I have seen Sita in the Ashoka garden of Lanka. You must cross the vast ocean to get there."

The monkeys lost heart at the news but Hanuman urged them to proceed. They soon came to the shores of the mighty ocean. Seeing the vast expanse of water before them they lost heart, but not Hanuman. In a thunderous



voice he declared that he would cross the ocean to rescue Sita.

He knelt down to pray and a strange thing happened. He began to grow in size till he seemed to tower over the hills. With a cry, "Victory to Rama," he leapt into the air. Shouts of joy broke out from the monkey army.

Great was his delight when he saw Lanka shining like a jewel in the ocean. Getting back to his normal size he landed on the top of a hill. He looked at the city and wondered where Sita was. He made himself small and decided to set out in search of her. In and out of houses and gardens he searched. He entered the palace of Vibhishan, the brother of Ravan. Here he saw a huge temple of Lord Shiva. Bowing reverently before it he hastened on. He now came to the palace of Ravan. He found the king in his bed. The twenty eyes of his ten heads shut in deep slumber. It was quite a frightening sight. Hanuman made a quick exit from there. He found Sita in the Ashoka garden. She was dressed in torn clothes and was weeping profusely as she repeated, "Rama, Rama."

Hanuman waited till the demonesses guarding Sita fell asleep. He bowed before her, said, "Mother, I am Hanuman, Rama's servant."

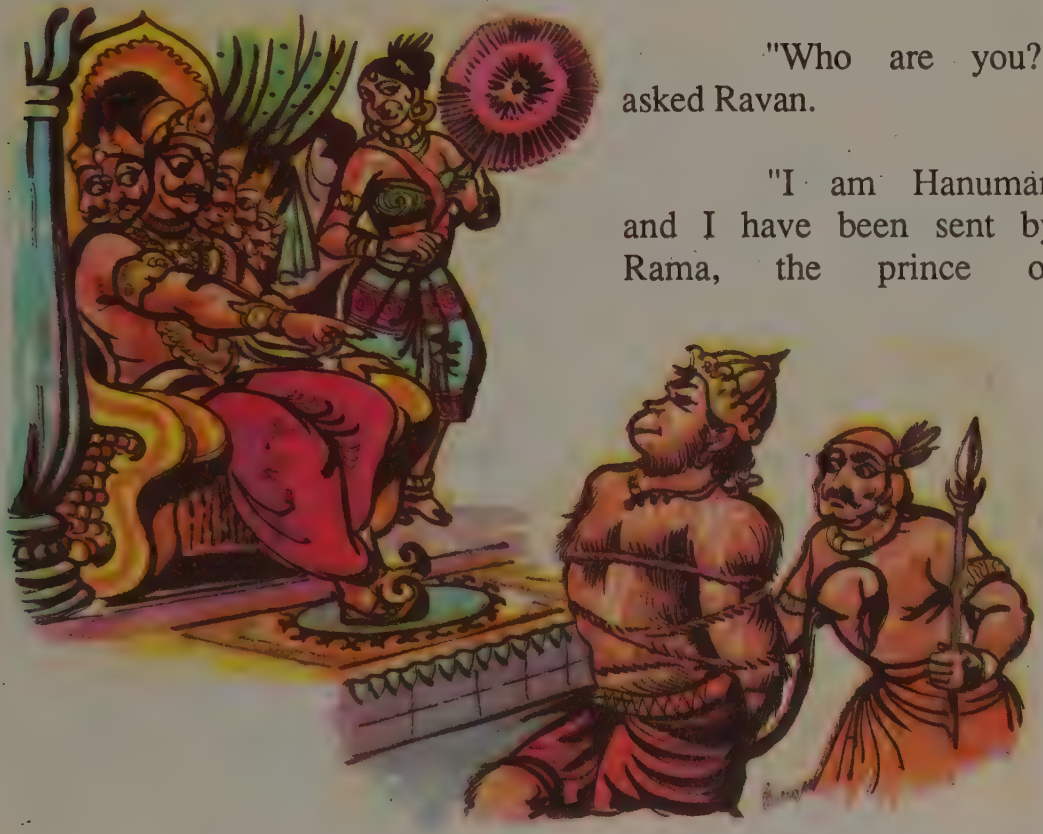
"How am I to know that you have really come from my lord? You may be one of the bad demons in disguise," said Sita.

Hanuman took out Rama's ring and said, "To prove that I have really come from Rama, here is the ring he has sent for you."

Sita's eyes filled with tears as she recognised Rama's ring. She said, "Go back to Rama and tell him of my plight. Tell him that I await his arrival to rescue me from the demons. Give this jewel to him." She also gave Hanuman a nectar fruit to eat. The taste was so delicious that he begged for more. Pointing to the trees, Sita said, "There they grow. Eat to your fill."

Great was his joy as he jumped from tree to tree and plucked the delicious fruits and ate them. The noise awoke the guards. They were surprised to see a monkey. They rushed at him. Breaking large branches he lashed out at them and they fell back in terror. He smashed the skulls of the demons and killed nearly all of them. The few who

escaped ran to Ravan and said, "A monkey has come, we know not from where. He has killed many demons." Ravan was enraged and sent his soldiers to capture him. They all met the same fate. Ravan's anger knew no bounds. How dare a monkey kill his brave demons! Finally he sent his son Indrajit. A fierce battle was fought between the two. Both were well matched and they fought for a long time. At last the demon prince lashed out his magic weapon that coiled itself around Hanuman. He was dragged towards the palace. By the time he had reached the palace gates, he had so grown in size that his captors were dismayed. How would he enter the palace? He was much larger than the doors. They ran to Ravan with their problem. "Break down the doors," their king ordered. So the huge doors were all hurriedly broken down and Hanuman was brought into the presence of Ravan.



"Who are you?" asked Ravan.

"I am Hanuman and I have been sent by Rama, the prince of Ayodhya. You have unjustly carried away his wife. For this wicked act he will come and slay all of you. I can kill you even as you sit

there, but Rama has pledged to do that himself. So I will leave it to him."

Ravan shook his ten heads in anger and roared, " Kill that monkey. How dare he speak thus to me."

But Vibhishan restrained him. He said, "It is not proper to kill a messenger. Punish him in some other way." Ravan ordered Hanuman's tail to be set on fire so that he would return home with a burnt tail. Immediately his tail began to grow longer and longer till in alarm Ravan cried, "Hold his tail down."

Thousands of demons held on to his tail as others set fire to it. Then they paraded him through the streets firmly bound up. Suddenly he reduced his size and became so small that the ropes binding him fell loose. He shook himself free and lo! He was his giant self again. He looked around and saw the fair city of Lanka. He would burn it up, he decided. Lashing out his burning tail he set fire to the houses and gardens. A strong wind seemed to spring up as though from nowhere and fanned the fire till every house was ablaze. The people, panic stricken ran hither and thither. Hanuman set fire to the palaces and the flames shot skywards.

He then took leave of Sita and once more leapt into the air. He was feeling quite pleased with himself. Not only had he found Sita but he had also punished Ravan.

Rama had given up all hopes of getting any news of Sita when he saw the happy faces of Hanuman and his army. Hanuman gave him Sita's jewel and related each incident in detail. Rama's heart burned with anger as he heard of Sita's plight. Only the death of the sinful Ravan could calm him. He decided to start without delay.

Entry into Lanka

After the departure of Hanuman, Vibhishan tried to persuade Ravan to send back Sita. "Only then can the race of demons be saved from Rama's wrath," he said.

"What? Send back Sita now and be ridiculed by gods and demons alike? After all, what have we to fear from a human and a handful of monkeys?" asked Ravan scornfully.

Vibhishan warned his brother. "Don't belittle your enemy,"

he said. "Rama is powerful and great. It is said that he is the incar-

nation of Lord Vishnu, born to punish evil-doers. He will surely destroy the fair city of Lanka and all who are in it. Why do you invite death and ruin to so many by your sin?"

Ravan was besides himself with anger. "I have never feared anyone, not even gods," he roared. "Why should I be afraid now of a mere human? Who are you to advise me?" He sprang on his brother and kicked him.

Vibhishan felt sorely insulted. He said, "I can no longer stay here. I will leave immediately." To his wife he said, "Serve Sita well whilst I am away. I go to take refuge at the feet of Rama."

Four ministers offered to go with him. With the help of magic, he rose with them into the sky. Soon Lanka was out of sight. The monkeys spied Vibhishan. They thought it was Ravan and got ready to attack him. "It is Ravan!" They all cried, "Kill him."

Vibhishan called out, "I am Vibhishan, the brother of Ravan. I have come to seek refuge at Rama's feet."

Rama asked, "Has Ravan sent you?"

"No, my lord, I have come to serve you."

Rama was pleased at these words. He poured a little sacred water over the head of Vibhishan and anointed him king of Lanka.

Nala, who could make rocks and stones float on water, was

told to build a bridge across the ocean to Lanka. Nala set to work and within a month the bridge was completed. The monkeys were exultant.

"Victory to Rama" they cried and started to cross the bridge. The demons ran to inform their king. "Rama has spanned the ocean," they told Ravan. "He is crossing it with his huge army"

The demon king grinned scornfully. He called one of his demon soldiers whose eyes had the power to burn up anyone on whom he looked. Ravan ordered him to go and destroy the entire monkey army. The demon shaded his eyes and galloped off at great speed.

Vibhishan saw the soldier coming and said to Rama, "That demon has the power to burn everything, that he gazes upon. Shoot arrows with mirrors fixed to them. Seeing his own face in the mirrors he himself will be destroyed."

Rama did as told. As soon as the demon uncovered his eyes he saw his own reflection and was immediately turned to ashes. The monkeys were exultant. With shouts of "Victory to Rama," they surrounded the city of Lanka.

Ravan was deeply worried. Rama had not only spanned the ocean but had also mysteriously killed the powerful demon. Ravan now called two demons and said to them. "Change yourselves into monkeys and find out the strength of the enemy and their plans."

The demons changed their forms and entered the enemy camps. Suddenly they came face to face with Vibhishan who recognised them at once.

The monkeys captured the demons and dragged them before Rama. Rama set them free.

"Go back to Ravan," he said," and tell him all that you have seen. Tell him that he will meet his death at my hands for kidnapping Sita."

The spies lost no time in running back to their king. They related everything and said,"Great is the might of Rama and vast is the monkey army. Even now an endless number is crossing the ocean." Ravan was not pleased at these words.

Ravan decided to attack with a huge army, he rode forth in full splendour.

Lakshman came forward and a terrible fight ensued. Ravan shot hundreds of powerful arrows at him but to his dismay all were split up in mid-air by the arrows of Lakshman. One of the prince's darts snapped Ravan's mighty bow in two, to the great joy of the monkeys. Immediately Ravan took another bow but before he could raise it, the heads of his horses and charioteer rolled to the ground. This enraged the demon king and he got into another chariot. He aimed his magic weapon at Lakshman. It struck Lakshman's chest and he fell senseless to the ground.

Ravan sent forth a hail of arrows. Rama shot one that struck him with great force and he fell down senseless. As he rose again, Rama's arrow cut off his crown. At this Ravan fled from the battlefield in fear of his life.

Ravan was greatly worried. Indrajit was pained to see his father. He said," I shall go to war, father. Please do not worry."

When Vibhishan learnt that Indrajit was coming,he said to Rama. "My lord, if Indrajit is allowed to fight he will kill everyone because of Brahma's boon by which he will always be victorious in war, but he will die on the day he is interrupted in his prayers and by him who interrupts him. Let Lakshman come with me. I will take him

to Indrajit's place of worship. He can then kill him."

Accordingly Vibhishan led Lakshman into the deep forest where Indrajit was engaged in his rituals. He stopped when he saw them coming. He was furious. "How did they find their way here," he wondered. "It must be the work of uncle Vibhishan , who alone knows of the one curse that could bring death to me. He sprang up to attack Lakshman. Both were equally matched in skill and valour. Indrajit could hardly get out of his grip.

They fought for a long time. At last, Lakshman hurled a divine weapon at Indrajit which struck off the jewelled head of Indrajit.

The Second Battle of Ravan

"Victory to Rama", This deafening cry reached the people of Lanka and a great fear seized them. Ravan fainted when he heard of his son's death. No one could console him. He tossed his ten heads in grief and despair. There was no comfort for him. "Return Sita to Rama and save the race," advised his counsellors. Ravan shook his heads and refused. He decided to go to the battlefield himself once again. He must kill those who were bringing death and destruction to the demon race. For the second time he rode forth in his golden chariot with a vast horde of warriors.

The monkeys prepared themselves for the attack but so sharp and quick were the arrows aimed at them that they scampered away in fright. Ravan sped on, killing wherever he went. Great was his wrath and sharp were his arrows. None seemed to escape him. At last the chariot stopped in front of Rama. The opponents fought furiously, flinging arrows and weapons with lightning speed. Suddenly a sharp dart struck Rama and he fell to the ground.

Lakshman sprang forward. Ravan hurled deadly weapons at him but he was able to stop them all in mid-air with his arrows. Enraged at this, Ravan chose a spear that meant sure death to the one it struck. He hurled it with all his might. Rama had recovered and was dismayed to see the spear go thundering through the air. It struck Lakshman with great force and pierced his chest.

The anger of Rama knew no bounds. He cried,"By killing Lakshman, you have hastened your own end. He hurled sharp and powerful weapons at Ravan.

Sorely wounded and with his life in peril, Ravan fled.

Rama wept as Lakshman lay mortally wounded. Sushena the physician, comforted him. "There is still some life in Lakshman," he said. "Send Hanuman to the Gandhamardan mountain for a life-saving herb. It is golden in colour. He must bring it before the break of dawn if Lakshman is to live."

Hanuman bowed his head when Rama told him to bring the magic herb. Lifting his tail he leapt into the air and was soon flying at great speed. Ravan saw him up in the air and was uneasy. On no condition whatsoever must Lakshman be revived. Summoning the Sun god to his presence, he said," I command you to go to the sunrise mountain and rise even though the night is but half done."

Hanuman was speeding on his way then to his utter dismay he saw the first rays of dawn light up. He seized the horses of the Sun's chariot.

"Who dares to bar my way?" demanded the Sun-god.

"It is I, Hanuman, the servant of Rama. You must not rise till I carry back the medicinal herb that will restore the life of Lakshman."

"I have been commanded to rise by Ravan," said the Sun-god. "Who dares disobey him?"

Angry at these words, Hanuman sprang forward and seizing the sun, thrust him firmly under his arm. Once more continuing his journey through the air, he arrived at the Gandhamardan mountain. The mountain was covered with numerous plants, and though he searched high and low, the gold-coloured medicinal plant could no where be found. Knowing that time was precious, he abandoned his search. Summoning all his strength, he caught hold of the mountain and gave a mighty tug. To his great joy, the mountain moved. Uprooting it, Hanuman placed it on his head.

With the sun under his arm and the mountain on his hand he faced south and rose into the air.

Descending to the earth, he placed the mountain at the feet of Rama.

"Though I searched for the herb, I could find it nowhere. So I have brought the mountain itself."

Rama was pleased and blessed him.

The herbs were plucked and rubbed over the wounded body of Lakshman. Gradually, life seemed to return to the still form and the monkeys turned mad with joy when Lakshman rose and clasped Rama. Hanumah lifted the mountain and flew off to put it back in its place.

Rama warmly welcomed him when he returned. Then he

asked, "Hanuman, what is that bright thing shining under your arm?"

"Oh, it is the sun," Hanuman explained. "He insisted on rising at the bidding of Ravan. As that would have been disastrous, I had to hold him captive till Lakshman was brought back to life."

With a laugh, Rama said, "Release him."

The Third Battle of Ravan

Ravan decided to go to the battle again. He once more dressed for battle and getting into his golden chariot, commanded his soldiers to follow him.

Killing the monkeys right and left Ravan searched for Rama. When the two faced each other, the very earth seemed to tremble. Flame tipped arrows flew without pause. Ravan was like a lion unleashed and Rama like the god of destruction. Death seemed to stalk the field as thousands fell with arrows, and streams of blood began to flow. Ravan hurled his magic mace. Rama split it in two with his celestial spear. Then the dart of serpents was hurled at him and this he scattered by sending the Garuda dart that ate up all the serpents.

For seven days the battle raged. Ravan felt his strength failing and he began to lose heart. Rama did truly seem invincible. What was Ravan to do?

Rama too was in despair. Vibhishan said to him, "There is only one way to kill Ravan and it is with the Brahma weapon. This weapon is in the apartment of Ravan's queen but no one knows where it is hidden."

Hanuman said "My lord, allow me to go and I will bring it for you."

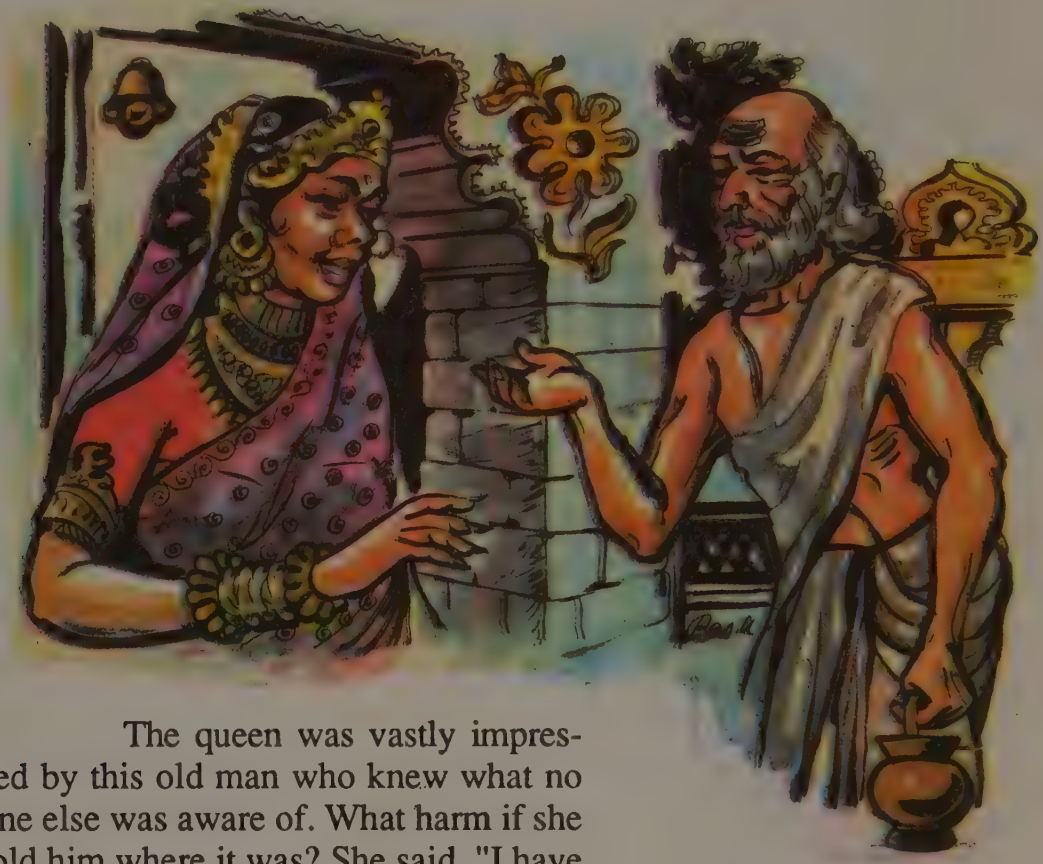
Changing himself into an old Brahman, Hanuman arrived at the palace of Ravan's queen. She was at prayers. Seeing a pious old man at her door, she welcomed him in.

"May Ravan be ever victorious," murmured Hanuman, as he

sat on the floor. "I am an astrologer and have read the stars to seek out Ravan's welfare. No harm can ever come to him if the treasure you have hidden is not revealed ."

"Of what treasure do you speak?" asked the queen.

"About the Brahma weapon. Do not reveal the secret even to the gods?"



The queen was vastly impressed by this old man who knew what no one else was aware of. What harm if she told him where it was? She said, "I have not as yet told it to anyone. But holy man, as you already know the secret of its existence, I shall tell you where it is. The Brahma weapon is hidden inside this pillar."

No sooner were the words out than Hanuman smashed down the pillar, snatched the weapon and in a flash leapt away. He placed it before Rama's feet.

Rama twanged his bow and with a battle cry, he once more faced the king of demons. There ensued a fierce fight. As Rama placed the Brahma weapon across his bow, Ravan saw it and was stupefied. 'How did it fall into his hands?' he wondered. 'No one knew of its existence except Vibhishan.' Ravan's anger knew no bounds as he thought of this betrayal by his own brother. He knew that no power could now save him from death but he fought on desperately. Rama released the weapon. Dazzling in the evening light, it sped on its deadly mission with a thundering noise and struck Ravan. The mighty monarch, the proud Ravan, lay in the dust, dead.

Great was the lamentation in Lanka as the news of Ravan's death spread. Vibhishan mourned his death and cried, "O my dear brother, power and wealth had made you blind and led you to your death. You would not listen to my words of advice and kicked me for it."

Rama calmed him, "Weep not for one who is no more," he said. "Get ready to perform his last rites."

Ravan was clothed in his royal robes and placed on the funeral pyre. The last rites were performed in a befitting manner. After the ceremony was over, Rama poured sacred water over Vibhishan and anointed him the king of Lanka.

Rama is Installed as King

The fourteen years of exile were over and Rama decided to return to Ayodhya. Vibhishan hastened to order the celestial chariot Pushpak. Presenting it to Rama he said, "This chariot drawn by swiftest swans will bear you through the air to Ayodhya."

After the farewells, the chariot rose into the air. It carried Rama, Sita and Lakshman and also Sugreev, Hanuman and countless monkeys. As it flew over the bridge built by them, Lakshman raised his bow and shattered it by his sharp arrows. Hanuman was sent ahead to intimate Bharat of Rama's arrival. Ayodhya was filled with joy. The desolate and abandoned city once more hubbed with life and laughter.

Men, women and children crowded out of their houses to await Rama's arrival. A cry of joy went up as his chariot touched the ground. Bharat rushed forward to touch the feet of his godlike brother. It was indeed a happy and blessed day for Ayodhya when the four brothers were united.

Bharat said, "I have served this kingdom in your name for all these years. I now place it in your care."

Preparations were made for the coronation. On an auspicious day, Rama with Sita by his side was crowned king.

For long did Rama reign, bringing wealth and prosperity to his land. His reign has become the most sacred and cherished era in the history of India.

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